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## **How to Get Your Message Heard: The Primal Power of Storytelling**

In the marketplace of ideas, there's a long history of tactics geared toward persuasion, coercion, obfuscation, and a lot of other multi-syllable words that all point in one direction: away from truth and connection.

Now, more than ever, we live in a world of static: too many messages to process, with the majority trying to trick us into buying or believing something, or inflaming our sensibilities with a goal of monetizing our attention.

It's exhausting, it's false, and it's degrading the way we communicate with each other. But if authentic storytelling is the key to cutting through the static, how do we get there?

### **What is a Story?**

A story is a narrative that says: *Listen. I have something of value to communicate to you.*

Storytelling, by its primal essence, is generous, inclusive, and sincere.

### **What's Not a Story?**

- Slogans
- Ads
- Statements of authority
- Arguments
- Manifestos
- Tactics of division

### **What's the Point of a Story?**

From the first stories humans told, to today's most effective narratives, good stories possess the quality of offering shared value and promoting mutual benefit.

They illustrate an idea, moral, or lesson through sympathetic characters, conflict, and a clear outcome.

**Primal example:** *When I crossed that ridge, there was a lion there, so I recommend for your benefit that you stay on this side of the hill.*

**A more contemporary example:** *Katniss toppled the oppressive Capitol regime through courage, collaboration, and love.*

**Brand-based example:** *John was feeling inhibited from expressing his individuality and nonconformist creativity, until he got an Apple computer, which helped him unlock the full expression of his ideas.*

## What Are the Basics?

Storytelling has so much power because it is so basic—it's hard-wired into what we are and how we live in the world. Compelling stories get our attention and make us want to share them with others. The structure of an effective story is the same across languages, regions of the world, and across time.

- Stories contain compelling characters and a narrative arc. They mimic the structure of life in moving through time and pointing toward a lesson to be learned.
- They communicate a message that is not explicitly stated (because it doesn't need to be) but intuited, felt, experienced.
- They use clear language, sensory imagery, and authentic human dialogue and they approach their audience with a spirit of openness. The best story is one that feels like a gift given to the listener.

Generosity, clarity, and truth: sounds easy, right? Well, it is and it isn't, especially in a culture that has gotten by on half-truths and manipulations for a very long time.

## What Makes People Stop Listening to My Story?

It can be tough out there. While the exact number is a matter of dispute, it's generally estimated that each of us receives *several thousand* messages every day, coming at us through screens, pages, and advertising.

But you don't need to be told that. You know you're inundated with messages, and you also know intuitively how you're learned, as a matter of survival and sanity, to tune out the vast majority of them.

So what are the messages that we've taught ourselves to ignore? The ones that don't follow practices of authenticity and offering value in the way they approach us. They make these common mistakes:

- Expressions of Authority: *My story is very important and you must listen to it for your own good.*
- Calls to Expertise: *Here are 10 facts that will make it impossible for you to disagree with me—listen and learn, lowly one.*
- Moral Bullying: *Ignoring my story means you are not a good person.*
- Self-Regard: *My story is so good and interesting, and as soon as you listen to it in its entirety you will see all the amazing things that I do. It's all about me/us.*
- Division: *My story is better than their story. I'm right, they're wrong; let me tell you why.*

## **Who is Your Hero?**

Traditionally, marketers and other professional storytellers have fallen back on the above approaches because in the past . . . well, they tended to *work*.

But technology and media have changed our world. The explosion in the number of messages we receive has rendered those approaches annoying static.

Today, we're looking for authentic messages that really matter.

Start from a different place. Ask yourself: *Who is the hero of the story I'm telling?* If it's you, or the organization or business you're writing for, you're on the wrong track.

If it's your reader, and your audience, then you're onto something.

## **How Can I Use Storytelling Effectively?**

We're all human, which means that we're flawed, and that we tend to fall into patterns in the way we work. When it comes to storytelling, that often means falling into one of the pitfalls that turns off our audience.

But by staying focused on authentic value, vulnerability, lively language that rings with heart and clarity, and laser focus on your audience, you can create stories that break through the static and make the world a better place.

Ask yourself if you're checking these boxes when you're telling your latest story:

- Find Your Truth: What is the positive, universal value of what you would like to express?
- Empathize With Your Reader: Your reader has a hierarchy of needs ranging from physical survival to spiritual thriving. How can your story tap into and satisfy those needs?
- Empower Your Audience: Great stories connect and instruct on a visceral and primal level. *Make your reader the hero of the story by relating on the level of shared values and illustrating those values in action.*
- Be a Mentor: We're all looking for guidance in how to be a more realized version of ourselves. Your organization can play that role in people's lives if you connect with them.
- Give it Away: Ideas are free. Don't reserve your best thinking for strategy sessions and then water it down for your storytelling. People know when you're giving them your best.

Great stories resonate, inspire, enliven, and make people want to go out and repeat them. The good news? In today's world, that means telling stories with heart, energy, and authentic value. Happy storytelling!